Patrick & Nelson

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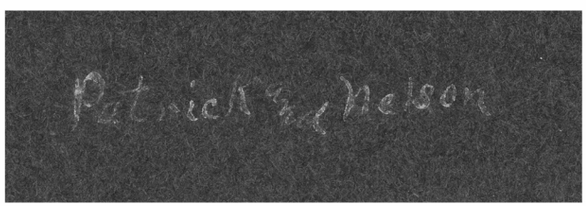


Reflections - Notes

Jeffrey Hunt

August 9 2026

This mounted photograph offers a sweeping panorama of Oakland, Oregon, around the turn of the 20th century. The view looks west across the valley floor toward the town, with the forested hills rising behind. The image is strikingly detailed, especially when viewed at high resolution. A rail fence stretches across the open fields below center, and multiple outhouses are scattered throughout the town—subtle but telling reminders of the era's daily rhythms. On the left stands the large white Russell Academy building—once a school and later a Masonic Hall—anchoring the town's civic presence.

Additional research has helped identify a number of other structures within the panorama, including Smith Livery, Page & Dimmick Pharmacy, Stearns Hardware, the E. G. Young Building, Thomas Hotel, railroad station warehouses, churches, and several prune dryers. The Thomas Hotel water tower and portions of Oakland's early water system may also be visible. Taken together, these details allow the photograph to function almost as a map of Oakland at a particular moment in its development.

This is Oakland in a moment of transition: a town that had moved beyond its pioneer roots but had not yet stepped into the modern industrial century. There are no automobiles and no paved streets, and the infrastructure that would soon transform daily life was only beginning to appear. According to The Making of Oakland by J. V. Chenoweth, the town's first telephone exchange arrived in 1903. The limited distribution of visible telephone poles in the photograph suggests that we may be seeing Oakland before the wires were widely strung and before the switchboards lit up—a quiet Oregon town suspended between eras.

For that reason, the photograph is dated approximately to the 1890s–1900 rather than to a specific year.

The photograph captures more than a view, however. It holds an atmosphere. Space, time, and mood are suspended with dignity and grace. This is turn-of-the-century Oregon as it was lived and felt. You can almost hear the chickens crowing, the wind rustling over the grass, the occasional clink of metal, horses and wagons, and the distant calling of children.

Those sounds are imagination, of course, not evidence in the photograph. But that is part of the power of a fine historical image. It begins as documentation and becomes an invitation to think about the lives taking place within and beyond its frame.

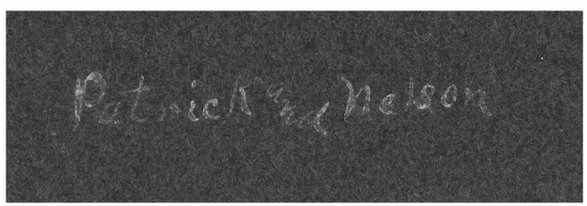
When enlarged, the standing forest on the hills above the town becomes especially striking. Below it, Oakland is still small enough that houses, barns, gardens, businesses, fields, and open land blend together into one landscape. The pioneer period remains close at hand while the modern century is approaching.

The brilliance of a fine photograph.

The lower right corner of the mount bears the handwritten signature “Patrick and Nelson.” The Umpqua Valley Museums identify the image as:

Photo Record N16312
Patrick Nelson, “Panorama of Oakland, OR,” c. 1890s

This print comes from the Vail Dear Steel Box Collection, preserved for many years by “Grampa Tim,” Thurman Eugene Dear. The collection contains not only photographs of family members but also images of the places, businesses, neighbors, friends, and communities surrounding them. Oakland itself is therefore part of the family story.



The Vail, Dear, and related families lived within this community and the surrounding Douglas County landscape. Even when a photograph does not show an identifiable relative, it can preserve the physical and social world in which those families lived.

For me, this photograph is both a historical document and a family artifact—a remarkable window into Oakland at the turn of the twentieth century.

Patrick & Nelson

RESEARCH AND SOURCE NOTES

Umpqua Valley Museums
Photo Record N16312
Patrick Nelson, Panorama of Oakland, OR, c. 1890s.

Historical reference
J. V. Chenoweth, The Making of Oakland — consulted regarding early Oakland history and the establishment of telephone service.

Additional research and identification
Wally Dunsmoor — contributed significant information concerning Oakland buildings and features visible in the photograph.

Collection provenance
Vail Dear Steel Box Collection. Preserved through Thurman Eugene Dear and retained with family historical materials.

Physical object
Original photograph mounted on board; approximately 7 × 9 inches.